



ART

## Darren Waterston is the artist creating paintings you can physically walk into

By [Poppy Malby](#) 25 January 2020

Presenting everything you need to know about the American artist ahead of his first UK solo exhibition at the V&A...

Darren Waterston primarily identifies himself as a painter, but he also has a fond interest in [architecture](#). That might explain why Waterston creates unique spaces that enable the viewer to feel as though they are quite literally walking into a painting. Waterston's principle theme throughout his work is to

exploit historical aesthetics by reimagining them and bringing them into the present, proving that historical art themes are still essential to modern art today.

In Waterston's exhibition *Filthy Lucre* at the [V&A](#), he presents a detailed reimagining of James Abbott McNeill Whistler's famous "Peacock Room". This lavish 19th-century dining room – once housed just a stone's throw away from the V&A – has been described by Waterston as being "in a state of decadent demolition – a space collapsing in on itself, heavy with its own excess and tumultuous history".

The artist presents a twisted interpretation of Whistler's original work, as the decor appears in various stages of destruction. Through the distress of the panelling, lighting and furniture, Waterston brings the Victorian era into today by making symbolic comments on economic inequality. Read on to find out more about Waterston's inspiration...



**1. What was the first memory you have of 'success' in the art world?**

About 18 months after I received my undergraduate degree, I was given my first major gallery exhibition in [Los Angeles](#), which I was really not expecting. I was so young and not fully ready for all the attention and scrutiny around my work. Soon after I had my first New York gallery representation with Charles Cowles, who was this iconic art dealer and big personality. He called me “kid” and taught me a lot about the art world and how to navigate through it.

**2. What did you want to be when you were growing up?**

I always wanted to be an artist but I didn't really know what that meant in its totality. As a young lad, I just wanted to make art and wear dapper little outfits. I was a bit of a child dandy.

**3. What is the best piece of advice you have ever received?**

Always take the long view of your life and career and try to ride the ups and downs with grace and humour.

**4. What is the worst?**

Play by the rules.

**5. Who is the one person, dead or alive, that you would like to have dinner with and why?**

Well, at this juncture in my life it would certainly be James McNeill Whistler. We would have a lot to talk about.





**6. For someone wishing to start their own art collection, what are your three top tips?**

Take risks.

Don't follow trends.

Collect from your heart.

**7. Are you excited to exhibit in London?**

To be a living artist having a solo exhibition at the V&A is indeed one of the great honours of my life. The nature of my installation references painting,

architecture, ceramics and decorative design, so exhibiting *Filthy Lucre* in the context of the V&A makes it especially potent.

### **8. What makes it different to America?**

It's funny to think about but Whistler was an American who came to London as an artist and did his best work here.

### **9. Tell me more about your presentation of Whistler's 'Peacock Room'...**

*Filthy Lucre* is an immersive installation reimagining Whistler's famed "Peacock Room". I've re-created each of the room's individual elements with a twist so that it feels like a magnificent ruin crumbling under the weight of material decadence and the egos of those involved in its creation.

### **10. What gives you inspiration?**

The music of Arvo Pärt, the poems of John Ashbery and my garden at night. I am always immersed in art history, particularly the Northern [Renaissance](#). Flemish and German painters, such as Jan van Eyck and Cranach, get me so excited.



### **11. How do you deal with creative blocks?**

If I'm feeling a bit distracted or stuck, I'll go work in the garden, do physical labor or take a long bike ride and that usually gets me back on track. Music also really helps a lot, like blasting out Perfume Genius when I need to get out of my head.

### **12. What is your favourite art gallery in the world and why?**

The Cloisters in New York City, which is [The Metropolitan Museum](#)'s medieval collection. It's a very special place for me and I've been going there since college. The collection is astounding and it feels like you're in a 13th-century monastery but still in Manhattan.

### **13. If you could collaborate with anyone, who would it be and why?**

Nico Muhly. He is a brilliant young composer who I greatly admire. I'd love to collaborate with him on an opera and design the sets.

**14. If you could visit any artist's studio, whose would you visit and why?**

Anselm Kiefer. He's one of my favourite living artists and I'd want to see the space where he creates.

**15. What was the last thing you bought?**

I just bought a moss green silk [velvet jacket](#) at Richard James in London for the V&A opening this week. It's so damn beautiful and very Whistlerian. This very charming, witty gentleman looked after me in the shop, then suddenly just walked out the door and was gone. The other salesperson then said to me, "That was [Richard James](#) who just fitted you!" I nearly fainted.



**16. What is your favourite piece of clothing you own?**



I have this old Costume National double-breasted, fur-collared suede [long coat](#) I bought 15 years ago. It was so out of my price range but I splurged and it still gives me such pleasure to wear.

### **17. What is hanging on your walls at home?**

Since I was in my early twenties, I have collected photography and works on paper, my favourites being a little William Blake etching, a really good Albrecht Dürer woodcut and several extraordinary Duane Michals photographs. I look at them every day and thank my lucky stars I get to live with these objects.

### **18. What is one staple item all men should own?**

A [jockstrap](#).

### **19. Can you tell us more about your favourite pieces in your new exhibition and how the sense of an 'ego' is a key component throughout the collection?**

*Filthy Lucre* is an imposing free-standing architectural sculpture, if you will, that the viewer walks into for an immersive experience. It is dimly lit and very moody inside with a hauntingly beautiful soundscape by Betty. Whistler and his close friend and patron had a horrible falling out over the creation of "The Peacock Room" – a proper talons out, peacock fight over money and wounded egos. My installation represents the emotional underbelly of this fabled room and story of art.

## **20. So, what is next for Darren Waterston?**

I have an upcoming exhibition of new paintings that opens in April at DC Moore Gallery in New York. I am also working on a large site-specific immersive installation based on a Byzantine chapel, which includes a mosaic apse, a cycle of fresco paintings and a glorious poem by Mark Doty that I am illustrating across the entire nave. It's called "The Congregation Of Tears".

